

Beyond the Basics Session
October 19, 2006
Tom Watson

Make Time for Innovation

Introduction:

In 2005, King County agencies recycled 1.7 million pounds of paper and nearly 5 million pounds of metals, just to name two materials. We're very proud of this. But the other waste prevention activities we've undertaken - and the waste prevention opportunities that we haven't been able to take advantage of yet - are the real story.

Nearly any business or government agency also has great opportunities to go "beyond recycling" and launch innovative reduction, reuse, and buying recycled products. But it's very difficult to break out of the day-to-day rut. The keys to innovation are:

- Allocate staff time, budget, and other resources to help make these projects happen.
- Turn as many of these efforts as possible into regular, self-sufficient projects ("institutionalize" them).
- Plan less, do more.

Background:

Located on Puget Sound in Washington State, and covering more than 2,200 square miles, King County is nearly twice as large as the average county in the United States. With more than 1.8 million people, it also ranks as the 13th most populous county in the nation. King County includes mountains, islands, wilderness areas, farms, suburbs, and the city of Seattle. King County is home to the headquarters of Microsoft, Starbucks, and Amazon.com, and to huge Boeing airplane manufacturing plants.

King County government has about 15,000 employees and an annual budget of \$3.4 billion. King County runs the courts system, the sheriff's department, a major jail, public health, the Seattle area bus system, wastewater treatment, a large landfill, licensing, permits, elections, parks and much more. All of these operations are included in our WasteWise efforts. King County is the first - and so far the only - local government in the WasteWise Hall of Fame.

Examples of King County reduction, reuse and buy-recycled efforts that go beyond the basics include:

- A contract with a local nonprofit used building materials store for salvage of used building materials. This and other salvaging efforts resulted in more than 600,000 pounds of used building materials salvaged and reused from King County projects in 2005.
- Project with Dell to reduce packaging for computer purchases (mixed results).
- King County's fleet of 140 hybrid vehicles.
- The County's extensive internal green building efforts, which include two major County buildings that are LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design)

certified, with more on the way. (The County Council passed an ordinance last year directing new County government buildings to meet LEED standards.)

- In 2005, the County saved about \$260,000 by using retreaded tires for trucks and other heavy equipment.

For more information on King County's WasteWise program and these projects, see <www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/about/waste-wise> or call Tom at 206-296-4481.

What your business or agency can do to go beyond the basics:

- Assign dedicated staff time. Even if it's only 5-10 hours a week, that's a start.
- Enlist help from government agencies. Local or state governments, or your EPA regional office, can help on some projects with advice, referrals, and publicity.
- Consider working with local nonprofits. They have expertise you don't, and are often happy to work with local businesses or governments.
- Take advantage of motivated employees. These days, nearly every organization has employees passionate about the environment. They can help you get things done.
- Try to act on employees' suggestions. Employees and management love it when you can talk about a successful new project as being "the brainstorm of Jane in accounting," for example.
- Don't do "pilot projects." Just make a commitment, start the project, and improve it (learning from your mistakes) as you go.

Conclusion:

I'm not sure who first said this, but it's appropriate here:

If you always do what you've always done, then all you'll get is what you already have.

Tom's bio: Tom Watson coordinates the King County WasteWise program, among other projects. Tom has been a recycling and waste reduction project manager for King County Solid Waste Division since 1992. Prior to that, he was a writer and editor for Resource Recycling magazine.